

# Women Can Never “Belong” in Combat

---

by Anna Simons

**D**emi Moore never perspired in the movie *G.I. Jane*, she sweated. And she had to do so in order to convey how much work was involved in becoming the first female member of a combat-oriented Special Operations team. No woman currently serves in such a unit. But what Moore’s performance suggests is that if only the right female were given the opportunity to prove her ability to meet the same physical standards as the military’s most elite combat soldiers, then even these men would have to grant her their grudging respect. She would belong, and presumably pave the way for other gritty women.

Hollywood, of course, gets this completely wrong. Respect does not guarantee belonging. No matter how much respect a particular woman may garner, no matter how courageous or physically adept she might prove to be, not even the military’s most unconventional combat units are unconventional enough to accept a female as a male. This observation, transparent though it may seem, remains opaque to those whose crusade it is to see the armed services tear down what they regard as misogynous gender walls. Nevertheless, in today’s military, Moore’s character (like Meg Ryan’s in *Courage Under Fire*) would have to be shown respect not only because she is an officer, but because a chilly climate of fear pervades the services. It has been fed by the combined aftereffects of the Tailhook scandal, the sexual harassment charges at Aberdeen Proving Ground, and the long reach of retroactive and sometimes vengeful political correctness.

Perhaps, then, we should not consider it surprising that the never-ending debates over the combat exclusion laws, which preclude women from serving in front-line or behind-the-lines units, continue to generate a fog of battle all their own. Lost in most of the arguments is common sense, both regarding the purposes and functions of the U.S. military—deterrence and defense—and the potential consequences of mixing men and women together—sexual attraction and pregnancy. Rather than regarding these predictable outcomes as unalterable realities, however, those who advocate lifting the ban point to a long American

---

**Anna Simons** is an associate professor of anthropology at the University of California at Los Angeles, visiting associate professor at the Naval Postgraduate School, and author of *The Company They Keep: Life Inside the U.S. Army Special Forces* (The Free Press, 1997). The views expressed here do not represent those of the U.S. Navy, the Department of Defense, or the U.S. Government.

tradition of being able to amend behaviors, beliefs, and ideals. Culture, so far as they are concerned, *can* be changed, hence they seek to legislate into existence a series of new attitudes among men and women alike.

But careful examination of the culture of combat (and what must be simulated in order to train successfully for combat) reveals that unit cohesion and morale are no more subject to “legislation” than is combat itself. Even if new sets of behaviors, beliefs, and ideals could be legally demanded of individuals, any human group’s cohesion and morale depend on a chemistry utterly imperious to external decrees. Alter the composition of a group and its cohesiveness will change. Make personnel changes and morale will soar or plummet. There may be nothing more critical to the effective performance of units—or, as a consequence, of the U.S. military as a whole—than these intangibles.

Unfortunately, there is nothing quantifiable about human bonding, and as a result, the “glue” within units tends to be ignored. Furthermore, those statistics that are brought into the debate over combat exclusion laws reflect a singular preoccupation with individual capabilities and liabilities, such as the number of women who become pregnant, the weight soldiers have to be able to lift, or the distance they should be able to walk.<sup>1</sup> No one talks in terms of units as *the* unit to measure or analyze, although it is units, not individuals, that are marshalled into battle, sent against the enemy, and expected to hold the line.

Nevertheless, sound arguments can be made concerning the ineffable importance of bonding, cohesion, and morale to the performance of units, and indeed must be made if common sense is to prevail over ideology.<sup>2</sup>

---

**No military has improved on male bonding as a way to build unit cohesion.**

---

### Cohesion and the Mixed-Gender Unit

Cohesion should be regarded as the most serious obstacle to gender integration precisely because no structure can guarantee it, though certain known factors will surely inhibit or disrupt it. Solidarity derives from complex organic processes. Perhaps the fact that most militaries have excluded females from combat is nothing more than a coincidence of universal proportions. Regardless, so far, no military anywhere has *improved upon* male bonding as the fundamental building block of unit cohesion.<sup>3</sup> Without ques-

<sup>1</sup> See Linda Bird Francke, *Ground Zero: The Gender Wars in the Military* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1997); and Brian Mitchell, *Women in the Military: Flirting with Disaster* (Washington, D.C.: Regnery, 1998).

<sup>2</sup> See Elizabeth Kier, “Homosexuals in the U.S. Military: Open Integration and Combat Effectiveness,” *International Security*, Fall 1998, pp. 5–39; and Melissa Wells-Petry, “To the editors,” *International Security*, Summer 1999, pp. 186–94. For a more grounded analysis of cohesion and bonding among soldiers, see Nora Kinzer Stewart, *Mates and Muchachos: Unit Cohesion in the Falklands* (McLean, Va.: Brassey’s, 1991); and Eyal Ben-Ari, *Mastering Soldiers: Conflict, Emotions and the Enemy in an Israeli Military Unit* (Oxford: Berghahn, 1998). The classic comparative account is William Darryl Henderson, *Cohesion: The Human Element in Combat* (Washington, D.C.: National Defense University, 1985).

<sup>3</sup> Nor does Lionel Tiger consider it a coincidence that young men in groups produce violence—which is precisely what militaries are designed to control, both offensively and defensively. *Men in Groups*, 2nd ed. (New York: Boyars, 1984).

tion, solidarity has been attained with women present in some wars of survival, among some partisan groups, and in some guerrilla movements. However, no one has compared the cohesion achieved in those units with cohesion achieved in all-male units. Nor does any evidence suggest that this cohesion can be duplicated in large-scale militaries that, by design, *train* for war far more often than they engage in it.

The instruments and methods for maintaining morale and sustaining rigorous training differ, by definition, depending on whether there is peace or war. Training, which is the principle activity of standing armies, is invariably boring, and boredom presents a radically different set of challenges than does fighting. This is something that few people outside the military seem to appreciate, while not enough commanders within the services pay sufficient heed to the monotony of routine training. It must also be remembered that members of a national military such as the U.S. armed forces can be (and increasingly have been) commanded to engage in humanitarian and police actions that are unrelated to the nation's immediate survival. In fact, this would seem to mark a fairly obvious distinction between the duties of a peacetime army and those of a conscripted wartime force. Ironically, it has been just these sorts of actions, and U.S. servicewomen's performance under fire in Panama and the Persian Gulf, that have drawn increasing attention to women's potential role in combat, never mind that the single fire fights in which they performed so well do not add up to sustained war, or that technology has hardly lightened the foot soldier's (literal) load.

The arguments usually offered for and against the combat exclusion laws tend to revolve, therefore, around women's physical abilities and their physiological limitations, presumptions about military culture and the attitudes of men in today's All-Volunteer Force, and historical (even cross-cultural) examples of the effect (and/or effectiveness) of female combatants. Proponents often emphasize the exploits of exceptional women or cite the fact that women fought during wars of survival in such disparate locales as Greece, the Soviet Union, Israel, and Eritrea, implying that such cases prove women *can* be present on the battlefield with no ill effects.<sup>4</sup> Yet, scattered ethnographic evidence also suggests the opposite. For instance, the great Shaka Zulu, widely recognized as a military genius, insisted on segregating his male and female regiments. Similarly, Mau Mau freedom fighters in Kenya (1952–55) found that “what disturbed [Kikuyu] men most was, first, the old taboo against wartime sex and then, when that became impossible to sustain, that sexual competition would wreck comradeship and discipline.”<sup>5</sup>

With universal service, of course, no one would have to worry about

<sup>4</sup> See, for instance, David E. Jones, *Women Warriors: A History* (Washington, D.C.: Brassey's, 1997).

<sup>5</sup> J. Lonsdale, “The Moral Economy of Mau Mau: Wealth, Poverty and Civic Virtue in Kikuyu Political Thought,” in *Unhappy Valley: Conflict in Kenya and Africa*, ed. B. Berman and J. Lonsdale (London: James Currey, 1992), p. 457.

alienating or offending the sensibilities of the already small pool of men from which members of the combat arms are currently drawn in this country. The military would somehow have to get around issues of women's overall fitness and toughness (as some have argued it has done already through "gender norming"). Likewise, allowances would have to be made for women's physiological needs (as also now often occurs, with showers, portable toilets, and such provided for women in the field). Yet, even were universal service adopted to address critical equity issues related to citizenship, opening up combat units to women—rather than creating all-female units—would still not solve the least tangible problem associated with gender integration, and one that no amount of new rules can recalibrate: cohesion. Tellingly, too, physical and physiological differences would likely remain a key rallying—if not sticking—point for combat soldiers and combat veterans who consider themselves representative of the mainstream.

### **The Birds and the Bees Revisited**

The reality that those on both sides of the argument want to ignore (though for different reasons) is that the male and the female of the species are different. On the one hand, there is what women allegedly lack that men do not—speed, strength, stamina. On the other, there is what women have that men do not—menstrual periods, the potential for pregnancy, breast milk. Even young ROTC cadets who have been raised to regard women not merely as equal but "the same" usually begin any discussion about gender integration by citing women's lack of upper-body strength. Combat veterans invariably do. They know how important it is to face fire with people who can carry out the wounded and sling heavy guns or sandbags in a hurry. However, if pushed, even the most adamant agree that perhaps there are some exceptional women out there "who could make it over the high bar," just as there are many men who cannot.

One sure way to deflate all the arguments about women being too physically weak for combat is simply to agree that women should have to meet the exact same physical standards as men. But when that argument is made, military men tellingly shift their ground. Some turn to physiological differences, as one retired Special Forces colonel did when all he "needed to say" on the subject was: "Most females just aren't physically or mentally prepared to live in the woods the way we do; they can't shower; they've got female problems every month."<sup>6</sup> Similarly, a retired rear admiral laughed at

<sup>6</sup> This and other quotations are taken from personal interviews with active duty and retired Special Forces soldiers and officers, active duty and retired SEALs and naval aviators, and ROTC cadets from UCLA. Formal fieldwork was conducted among Special Forces soldiers at Ft. Bragg, N.C., (1991–92), the subject of the book *The Company They Keep: Life Inside the U.S. Army Special Forces* (New York: The Free Press, 1997). Formal interviews were also conducted in person and by telephone with active duty and retired navy personnel in San Diego (1997) on the specific topic of integrating women into Special Operations Forces.

the preposterousness of women on SEAL teams operating in shark-infested waters: “What group of SEALs would launch an ocean mission with a menstruating woman in their midst?” (One might also wonder what woman would put herself in this kind of danger.) Pregnancy raises a host of related questions, chief among them being: how does the inability to deploy or the need to withdraw women due to pregnancy (or menstruation) *not* sap unit strength?

The military is and must be predicated on the notion that everyone who trains together will deploy together. Otherwise, training with the same people day in and day out serves no practical purpose. All members in a squad or fire team have to be familiar with one another’s quirks for something so simple as a patrol to go well. And the combat arms comprise nothing but small units that must relentlessly practice such maneuvers if the coordination they strive for is to be achieved.<sup>7</sup> Unforeseen absences due to illness or injury cannot help but affect a unit’s ability to perform its tasks *as* a unit. In hard-charging combat units, soldiers and Marines will often suffer with pain and forgo medical treatment precisely to avoid being released from duty. One distinction between pregnancy and an unforeseen illness or injury is that a pregnant woman cannot simply “suck it up”; pregnancy requires that a woman be removed from duty. In addition, pregnancy and problems associated with menstruation can hardly be considered random or accidental events that could happen to any soldier. No comparable, or separate but equal, set of “disabilities” renders males non-deployable. Consequently, it becomes virtually impossible to convince men that women’s gender will *not* render them a liability at some point. The concern will always lurk that women could be absent for prolonged, and thus potentially critical, periods of time.

We see the effects of such expectations in, for instance, the corporate world, which—rightly or wrongly—has long presumed that women of child-bearing age are less dependable than men. The fact that women *do* avail themselves of maternity leave, surrender high-status positions after giving birth, or quit their careers entirely merely confirms many men’s suspicions that women’s priorities—and loyalties—will shift. The significance of this at subconscious levels is something the military has not sufficiently considered. In practical terms alone this promises turbulence within units. But treating pregnancy as a “disability,” or as an incident akin to an injury or debilitating

<sup>7</sup> This, of course, represents the ideal. In prolonged conflicts commanders have to be able to treat fighters interchangeably, although pilots, soldiers, and Marines can hardly regard one another with such dispassion and new personnel must prove themselves before they are accepted. Conformity is key. In a pinch, women can conform simply by taking up arms. As soon as a group’s survival is no longer threatened, however, women’s “non-maleness” becomes noticeable again. The status of Eritrean female soldiers is a case in point. Eritrea was long lauded for having a highly integrated military. Yet, once the struggle for independence was over, numerous women complained that they were no longer treated as first among equals. This has since become a topic of research for feminist Africanists, among others.

illness, sends less-than-subliminal messages that compound the damage that gender-specific absences already do.

Still, no matter how important it may be to consider the implications of women's absence, it is actually their *presence* in tightly knit units that poses the far greater threat.

### **Operational Intimacy**

Soldiers and Marines in ground combat units routinely experience operational intimacy. No set of individuals anywhere trains to spend so much time together in such close and unyielding quarters. While members of police and fire departments can be said to engage in similarly hazardous duty, they invariably work in shifts, escape from one another for predictable, guaranteed periods of time, and indeed enjoy the comforts of home and family on a regular basis. War does not occur in shifts, nor do field exercises. There is no going home to one's spouse and family every twenty-four hours. War is a crazy mix of long, boring lulls and periods of intense, sleepless activity. So is training. Both can be highly demanding in different and unhealthy ways. For example, some Special Forces soldiers during the Gulf War went without taking a shower for fifty-four *days*, and few of them even considered the 100-hour-long ground assault that climaxed that conflict to have been a real war, given its brevity. Nor do members of police and fire departments have to subsist on cold MREs (meals ready to eat), as did some soldiers and Marines in the gulf.

By the nature of things, then, fire and police departments enjoy the leeway that deployable combat units know they cannot count on. Not even the most flexible and innovative military units can approach the methods available to other government agencies that enable individuals to escape group constraints, whether in the work place or during supposed off-hours. Indeed, having to come together as a team only *if* duty calls is antithetical to everything combat units train together to endure. One might, however, think that if women could be fitted into any combat units, then it would probably be into those that are least conventional and least regimented, especially if they could make it through the Special Forces', SEALs', or Rangers' months-long selection, assessment, and training programs, as does the character in *G.I. Jane*, and as Captain Katy Wilder tried to do in 1980.

The "Katy Wilder story," as it is referred to in Green Beret circles, is instructive, though it is also incomplete and hard to gauge accurately. The worst rumors about Captain Wilder, a military intelligence officer assigned to a unit in support of the 5th Special Forces Group, held that she slept her way to admission into the Special Forces Qualification (Q) Course. But these rumors, although long-lived, are not credible, since the decision to admit her to the course was made at levels well outside and above those in which she

moved. More believable are the reasons given for her failing “Robin Sage,” the final stage of the Q Course.

Robin Sage is a two-week-long field training exercise designed to test candidates’ ability to work in mock teams under intense pressure. Apparently, Wilder failed during this phase of her training largely because soldiers in the field did not consider her a team player. Whether this is because they did not want her playing with them, or she did not think they did, or she did not want to, is impossible to determine now and may well have been impossible to know then (although higher-ups, threatened with a law suit, eventually overrode the assessors in the field and passed her through the course on paper). Almost twenty years after the fact this still rankles men who knew of her at the time. Moreover, if what was said at the time and is still remembered is true, then the reason is revealing: she apparently still had food to eat when her teammates had none—and she refused to share. This, as anyone who has operated on a team will acknowledge, is a sin.<sup>8</sup>

The fact that this refusal—and not her physical or physiological shortcomings—is what most angers men who remember her is also telling because, without doubt, there *are* female mountaineers, sailors, athletes, and others who could make it through Special Operations selection. Significantly, too, it was a young woman, not a young man, who became the first person to swim from Cuba to Florida. SEAL candidates only have to swim five miles, a mere fraction of that distance.

It seems clear that at several points along the way it was Wilder’s status *as* a woman that marked her for special (or different) treatment. And this is what disturbs men who knew of her. It is also what worries men who currently serve and cannot countenance the idea of women being introduced into their units: women will attract attention *as* women. Wilder clearly did because she was the first. But all women will remain women even if they perform up to or beyond the standards of the Q Course. Physical difference, in this sense, is ineradicable. Moreover, female physical difference is of a radically different category than whatever “difference” is implied when people refer to race, although a soldier will, of course, remain a black or white soldier no matter how well he does (or does not do) in living up to his unit’s standards. Because that *categorical* difference cannot now be addressed within the services, it is imperative that it be done here.

One argument often heard is that, just as white soldiers prior to desegregation feared integrating blacks into their units, opposition to women in combat units on the grounds that their presence would destroy cohesion is tantamount to racism. But no matter how vigorously critics of the combat

---

**Regardless of  
their abilities,  
women will  
attract attention  
as women.**

---

<sup>8</sup> Special Forces teams consist of 12 individuals; SEAL platoons of 16.

exclusion ban employ this analogy, it is false. Segregation kept the races apart and stoked mutual disregard at multiple levels. By contrast, soldiers of all colors are raised by women, grow up with women, marry women, and are keenly interested in women. They know women. And, one can only presume, they understand—even if they cannot articulate it—what effect the presence of women has on them as *men*.

Ultimately, this is the sticking point, and one that too few of those making, enforcing, and analyzing policy are willing to acknowledge openly: heterosexual men enjoy the company of women precisely because women are not men. Nor can they pretend women are men. Men read women differently than they read other men. What they see when they look at women is not other “persons,” and how they think about women is not how they think about men. To paraphrase what one former Green Beret has long contended: “Men don’t sit across from teammates and think about sleeping with them.” This, underlying all the hierarchies the military puts in place, is the ultimate keeper of order. Teammates always know where they stand with one another: on the non-sexual side of intimacy, while as males they do not want to stay on just that side of the line with women. As one officer candidly sums up his behavior: “If a woman comes into my office, I do a physical assessment. Even if it’s for just ten seconds, I go through a sexual scenario with that woman. Can I ignore it? I try to. In this culture, there are penalties for acting that out. But it’s natural. There’s nothing wrong with it. We have to be real about it.” And he does this without women being aware; no one would mistake him for anything but a gentleman.

He is hardly unique, and he knows he is not. Men fantasize. In fact, a graphic fascination with women may be the only thing all heterosexual males share, which is why they talk about women so much. Women afford men an immediate, inexhaustible connection, more universal than sports, more entertaining than shop talk. And this is more than evident in the team rooms of Special Forces units. There, behind closed doors (with only junior officers present), team members routinely speak in terms society would consider sexist and bigoted. Nothing is sacred, and profanity flows. Merciless and purposely offensive “team room humor” affords men the ability to engage in continual one-upmanship without jeopardizing cohesion. As long as the commonalities hold—we are males, we are heterosexual, and we are soldiers—then everything else about individuals can be dismissed because nothing else is relevant to the team. What is key is that there be something outside of soldiering that ties everyone together, that everyone considers important, but can still treat lightly. As it happens, sex with women is it; it is an endlessly useful topic.

At the same time, however, the interest in women that serves as a sure-fire bond among men becomes a cleaver dividing them as soon as women are present. The tone of conversation changes. Benign posturing turns into serious competition. What had been easy and meaningless banter

among peers about what they would do *with* women gives way to meaningful attention being paid *to* women, and when women reciprocate the attention the bonds among even the closest teammates become strained. Women, without meaning to do so, automatically snatch men out of one another's orbits. Add one woman to a team of males, and the dynamic among the men will immediately shift. Add more than one woman, and multiple pools of tension will spread and overlap. In the wake of rivalry come envy, frustration, impatience, disgust. Women cannot help but rearrange the team's comfort zone.

It is simply too easy for team members to find complementarity in women. That is what wives represent (in good marriages). Teammates cannot duplicate this for one another and do not try. Comfort on teams comes from sameness. Everyone works the same, gets treated the same, treats everyone else the same. It is not only responsibilities that are divided up, but danger and reward as well. The all-for-one, one-for-all ethos requires that what is shared is really shared (thus Katy Wilder's sin). If, for instance, there is sex to be had, then anyone who wants it should be able to get it. If not, then tension mounts.

No team can afford to have teammates in love, or lust, because the integrity of small units depends on the implicit understanding that no one receives or merits special attention. This is another reason why the presence of women inspires creeping doubt. Nor is it women as individuals who are problematic; it is women simply as females. Talk to anyone who has spent time in a foxhole, hidesite, or snowcave, or on lonely, boring guard duty, and he will tell you that it is not possible to shake and shiver and wait with a female beside him without this making some sort of difference. Never mind what the female soldier may be thinking. It is enough that she distracts—and even if she does not, everyone else who is not present will still assume that she has. All that it takes to corrode cohesion is such a mistaken impression, a seed of mistrust, an infectious doubt. After all, part of what men cannot say too loudly is that, when it comes down to it, they know they cannot always trust themselves.

That is the point being made, however indirectly, whenever this topic is raised. It was the subtext of what a former prisoner of war, who spent nine months in North Vietnam, said when he was asked why he felt women should be excluded from combat units. Among other things, given what he was put through, he does not think men could withstand hearing female prisoners being tortured. "I could keep my cool if they said, 'If you don't do X we'll torture him,' but if they said 'We're going to torture her?'" He is certain that a single episode would have been enough to make him sign on the dotted line. But what if he would not do as his captors demanded? What if he could get used to women being treated in as raw a fashion as men in war? That, as a possibility, might spook him even more.

## Combat and the Feminine Mystique

So far, no one has suggested knocking Lady Justice or the Statue of Liberty off of her pedestal. Yet, this may prove far easier than changing men's dependence on women, or the male need for women to stand for certain things such as liberty and justice. Women, it must be emphasized, mean far more to soldiers than sex. They represent a contradictory bundle of good things, including comfort, motherhood, family, home, and everything else worth fighting for—nonviolence especially.

It is hard to imagine a set of males who know themselves and what they are capable of better than combat veterans. Thus, when a former SEAL draws the contrast between women and men with such assertions as “Men are violent. The male reaction to anger is violence. War is violent. It's the ultimate violent exercise,” one is obliged to pay attention. And it is difficult not to take note when, days later and miles away, the rhetorical questions of another combat veteran strike the same theme: “How many serial killers do you know who are female?” and “How many women commit rape?” Likewise, two aviators who have known each other for years believe (though it is unclear that everyone would) that “women are much more loving than men are. It's women and mothers who grow tired of war. If men were unchecked by women, men would destroy the world.”

In no society does it seem as simple a matter as men being from Mars and women from Venus. Too frequently, women have egged men on into fights or battle and lionized warriors on their return. However, the fact that it is combat-hardened men who voice such convictions is revealing. They point to a place—combat—where nothing is clear cut. No participant ever knows when he might be killed, maimed, spattered with gore, rescued, reprieved, or turned coward. Contrast this real world with an ideal world in which women, at least, are above the fray. Whether this places women on a pedestal where many would prefer not to be, or instead reflects a Vietnam-era reference to “the world” beyond the world of combat, is hard to say. It might simply be a shorthand way to preserve a whole set of ideals. Images of girlfriends, wives, women yet to be met, along with memories of mothers, sisters, and daughters offer soldiers something to live for *beyond* honor, duty, and the respect of the filthy, smelly, belching males beside them. If women become peers to turn to during combat, men will have lost them as a source of succor (and sanity) to return to—and that may be reason enough to keep females out of foxholes.

## The Conundrum

Somehow, the entire debate over women in combat units has slipped away from what combat is about. Who knows how horrific combat is better than veterans who have slogged through war? Yet, their views are routinely

discounted. Why? Because they couch them in chivalrous language that is considered chauvinistic? Because they talk about feeling protective? Come war, is that not exactly what everyone would want them to be?

As for combat soldiers who have yet to be bloodied, their concerns might be considered more suspect, especially members of Special Operations units that want to remain elite. Special Operators continually consider the angles, or, as one SEAL commander said, “They’re completely mission-oriented. Teams are so eager to try anything new or different they think might lend them an edge, you have to wonder: why are they so resistant to women?” Because—he answers with another question—“what could women add?” Forget what women cannot do. “In more than twenty years I’ve never heard anyone explain what women *can* do, and how they would help rather than hurt my teams.”

Yes, the availability of female fighters might well be helpful in certain urban, intelligence-gathering missions, as the world’s espionage agencies have long understood. And yes, there are women who would gladly shave their heads (like G.I. Jane) and can bench press 240 pounds. Others might even be able to outrun, outgun, and outlead this particular SEAL commander—or any other. But there is not a woman alive who could contribute enough to one of his teams over the long haul to make up for what her presence would do to the trust among his men. Women who would nevertheless try to join these units obviously do not understand this point. And the fact that they do not understand it is itself proof that they can never belong.

